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ABSTRACT

Applied communication research should be used by communication professors, communication departments, and colleges as an important tool for strengthening their relationships with their communities, students, and communication practitioners. Professors spend a great deal of time doing research and teaching people about research. Public misunderstanding of the research responsibilities of faculty members constitutes a serious public relations problem for universities, for the profession as a whole, and for communication scholars in particular. Public relations scholars need to begin cultivating mutually advantageous relationships with key publics. The academic discipline of communication should do more than accurately describe professional practice. It should also reflect on and critique existing communication practices, in order to improve practice. University, faculty, and students are a valuable yet often underused resource when it comes to aiding community problem solving and innovation. In particular, applied research might help local institutions become more effective and more responsive to their stakeholders. Engaging students in applied research may serve as one of the best tools for recruiting students to go on to graduate school and pursue academic careers. It also might help make better connections with communication professionals in public relations, journalism, and advertising. Turning toward more applied research holds the promise of invigorating teaching and research in public relations. (Contains 6 references.) (CR)

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Applied Research As Academic Public Relations

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Applied Research As Academic Public Relations

This essay is a personal apologia for applied communication research. An apologia justifies or defends an idea, proposition or doctrine against its detractors. In this essay, I defend the idea that applied research deserves as much esteem and honor as basic research or the scholarship of discovery. My primary thesis is that applied communication research should be used by communication professors and communication departments and colleges as an important tool for strengthening our relationships with our communities, our students and communication practitioners. Applied research can also serve to surprise us and shake us out of our intellectual lethargy by forcing us to consider new problems and applications to test and refine our theories against.

Writing this paper was an exercise in personal narrative. I felt a need to justify my own efforts in applied research to myself and to others. Over the last five years I have done an increasing amount of applied research in the Jefferson County Public Schools. I believe this kind of work is important, but it is often complex and frustrating. Moreover, the university offers rather sparse rewards for this activity, when the opportunity costs of forgone refereed articles are factored in.

As professors we spend a great deal of our time doing research and teaching people about research. You have also probably met people who think you only work 9 to 12 hours a week, or think you have vacation every week when classes are not in session. Even when people do recognize that university professors do research, they tend to regard it as a kind of peripheral cult activity that should not be an essential part of what we do. The nature of these misunderstandings was highlighted in Kentucky several years back, when Wallace Wilkenson, a former governor and trustee at the University of Kentucky, called a press conference to

highlighting his efforts to get UK professors to do more undergraduate teaching. He vociferously mocked academics who spent too much of their time doing research and publishing in what he called "itty bitty" journals. The ironical feature of this performance was that this self-made millionaire had made his fortune by selling college textbooks. The fact that the college textbooks he sold were largely a compilation and interpretation of the contents of "itty-bitty" research journals had apparently never occurred to him.

Public misunderstanding of the research responsibilities of faculty members constitutes a serious public relations problem for universities, for our profession as a whole, and for communication scholars in particular. Legislators, governors and university trustees continue to impose bureaucratic procedures to ensure that professors are spending enough time instructing undergraduate students. This public relations problem is particularly acute for communication professors who are confronted with very skeptical practitioner communities (e.g., advertising, journalism, & public relations). My interaction with communication professionals in PRSSA and IABC has revealed that they have little understanding or appreciation for what we do. Our teaching is seen as disconnected from their professional concerns, and they know little or nothing about our research. Yet states are turning to these groups of practitioners to have them assess the quality of our programs. If the attitudes that I have encountered are any indication, we lack legitimacy with many in our core stakeholder audiences. As such I will direct my comments toward the communication discipline and communication departments.

As public relations scholars, it is time for us to help our academic units begin practicing what we preach. Our units need to begin cultivating mutually advantageous relationships with key publics. In particular, we need to increase their understanding of and appreciation for what we do. The public relations deficits of university communication departments derive from

multiple sources. They will not be wiped away by one type of action or panacea. However, I believe that expanding and improving our efforts at applied communication research would be a valuable tool in these efforts. More importantly, I believe that such a focus can be harnessed to improve our communities, enhance our students' education, and provide an impetus to the practitioner communities that hire our graduates. My thesis is that applied communication research should be an important part of the public relations efforts of our discipline and our academic units.

What is applied communication research?

I am adopting Craig's (1989) notion that communication should be considered to be a practical discipline: one that is constituted by the ongoing dialectic between theory and practice. The discipline is located in the middle ground between the contingent practices of its practitioners and its more universal principles. Using the study of rhetorical practice as an exemplar, Craig (1989) notes that a practical discipline cultivates the practice of its field. According to Craig, a practical discipline inventories and describes the practices of communication practitioners. It attempts to capture the tacit logics of its practitioner communities. If it stopped here, communication would simply be an inductive discipline scanning, describing, summarizing and teaching the communication crafts. This body of knowledge would move and change as the professional practice innovated and evolved, but the academic discipline would add nothing new to those practices.

However, the academic discipline of communication should not stop there. It should do more than accurately describe professional practice. It should also reflect on and critique existing communication practices. The aim of this reflection and critique is to improve practice, especially the ethical practice of communication. The normative component is not drawn from

logically independent foundations, but from a critical reflection upon practice. The discipline seeks to influence and refine the actual practices of its field through its scholarship and through how it educates up and coming communication professionals. So for pedagogy in the communication arts, we presumably not only teach students how to do what practitioners do, but we also introduce them to ideas about how to practice communication better according to the idealized standards of the field (Craig, 1989)..

If communication is a practical discipline, then a good part of its research will be focused on the scholarship of application: work that applies existing knowledge and theory to consequential problems facing the discipline. The next section details how applied research might help us establish greater mutual respect between communication scholars and our key publics. I believe that applied research can play a role in establishing more advantageous relationships with our communities, with our students, and with communication professionals. I also believe that a dose of applied research also can also invigorate our own research programs.

Publics That can be Addressed by Applied Communication Research

Our communities

If politics is local, the same can be said for academic public relations. As we think about our stakeholders, the local community constitutes our primary set of stakeholders. Local citizens pay taxes to support our institutions of higher education. Beyond merely keeping the ratepayers happy, we also know that when local communities and institutions are healthy and prosperous, higher education tends to prosper as well. This is particularly true for public universities in metropolitan areas.

In thinking how we can reach out to the local community in our applied research efforts, I believe that we should explicitly focus our attention on participating with community institutions to investigate and solve communication problems located in the public sphere. In the abstract this proposal may sound rather grand, in reality it means that we participate in the mundane problems of public and non-profit institutions that work on behalf of the community as whole. As mentioned above, I have elected to work with individual schools on a variety of projects from serving on school committees, to helping schools assess their communication with parents so as to improve parental involvement. I choose to spend part of my time in this fashion, because I believe that part of my vocation is to participate in efforts that promote collaboration and innovation in the public interest.

Universities may represent the single most valuable resource that the public sector has. Universities have contributed immeasurably to the health and prosperity of the communities that support them. University research is dedicated to the proposition that knowledge should be sought after and shared with the public at large. University and faculty and students are a valuable yet often underused resource when it comes to aiding community problem solving and innovation. In particular, our applied research might help local institutions become more effective and more responsive to their stakeholders.

Business schools often have centers to foster small business incubation and innovation. This is a model that communication departments and colleges of communication might consider imitating. Some maintain that we need to foster the invention of new communication institutions and practices that will reinvigorate democratic discourse (Mayhew, 1997). Last year the PR division held a joint preconference with the Applied Division and the Health Communication

Division on community based scholarship. I see this as a healthy sign for our discipline. I hope that we will see a day when we have endowed chairs that focus on community based scholarship.

If we go the route of entering our communities to help them investigate and solve problems via applied communication research, we will need to do so as collaborators rather than experts. Top down models of expertise may be useful in solving some problems, but they are decidedly unhelpful when it comes to generating and implementing solutions for public problems: problems that require widespread collaboration and cooperation. In this effort, we must demonstrate our respect for the implicit knowledge and skills of our collaborators whether they are teachers, social workers, or entrepreneurs. If we assist in generating new forms of innovation, we must not attempt to unilaterally direct or control the direction of these efforts.

Our Students.

Our students should be our first and most important public. We most profoundly affect our communities and our profession through our graduates (for good or ill).

I think it is fair to say that many, perhaps most, communication undergraduate students have a minimal understanding and appreciation for the value of academic research. They often think of the library as a peripheral part of the University, and equate learning with what they find in textbooks. At one level students recognize that university instructors teach research results, but they often do not make the connection that academic scholars generate the knowledge that ultimately goes into textbooks. Students have heard the term publish or perish, but most of them assume that doing and publishing research is some kind of obscure peripheral activity that has little to do with teaching. Indeed many of them seem to regard it as a necessary evil that most professors must undergo in order to continue teaching. Some of my best students are genuinely surprised to find that I actually enjoy doing research.

We do have an in-built forum to correct these misconceptions. Like most research departments, my department has a required course in research methods. Although it is in our curriculum as a junior level course, many students postpone taking the course until the last semester of their senior year. Like communication students I have encountered at two other universities, they have heard horrific rumors about students being sacrificed to the Gods of statistics. The first day of class many of them register various combinations of fear and loathing for what they think is ahead of them. My modest goals for teaching each semester is to see if I can move them to at least a grudging respect for the value of systematic research. To do this, I have realized that I must help students understand the connection between systematic and disciplined inquiry and things that they are actually concerned about, problems they encounter in their community or in their chosen professions.

Most students have a brazenly instrumental orientation toward their education. They demand to know the value and application of the things we teach them. We all continually hear the question: how and where will I use this? This attitude tends to frustrate educators who tend to believe that the learning is something that is valuable in its own right. Toward this end, I strive to teach students how to read communication research, whether it is reported in the media, or in scholarly communication journals. Most of our students know that they will not do significant amounts of original research in their lifetimes. However, they can appreciate the value of being able to read and critically evaluate communication research that deals with issues and topics that they consider important. I have found that if you want to get a student curious and hooked on communication research, you should first introduce them to examples of good applied communication research. I draw liberally from NCA's *Journal of Applied Communication* when it comes to assigning research articles. When they see concrete examples

of how communication research can be utilized to address concrete issues and problems, their attitude often changes from hostility or indifference to grudging respect.

I have also found it useful to teach research methods with a heavy dose of experiential learning. In the class students conduct a small survey project as well as a depth-interview project. In the current semester, we had the opportunity to do a telephone survey project for a local elementary school concerning parental satisfaction with communication with the school. Over a three-week period we conducted 10 to 20 minute interviews with some 260 households, and entered and analyzed the data from the massive data set. The task gave students a good understanding of the experiential side of doing survey research. They learned that care, rigor and systematicity are absolutely essential if the effort is to be of any value. For instance, after they slogged through the interviews, students came to be invested in the project. The fact that students are working for a client who is depending upon the results cultivates a more serious and respectful attitude among students. They come to view the project as something real and important. They understood that simple careless mistakes would undermine all of their hard work. For instance, they quickly came to understand that seemingly small errors in data-entry can undermine all of the work that they have previously done. In summary, applied research projects help students make connections and become more reflective about the strengths and weaknesses of particular research methods and designs.

I also have come to believe that engaging students in applied research may serve as one of the best tools for recruiting students to go on to graduate school and pursue academic careers. In my experience, students who bring a deep reservoir of curiosity to their studies are often motivated by questions that arise out of their life experiences. They have experiences that they want to organize and understand, or practical problems that they want to solve.

Focusing on applied research on community related problems also reminds students that they can and should give something back to their communities. To have students do research in the public interest should encourage them to continue thinking in these roles in the future, to give something back to their communities and to their profession. The habits of community support and solidarity can be promoted by efforts such as service learning and applied research. Whatever else it may do for our communities, it will most certainly give our students a better appreciation for their community and their roles in it.

Our Professions.

Doing applied communication research might also help us make better connections with communication professionals in field such as public relations, journalism and advertising. I started the paper by noting that the legitimacy of what we do is often not widely appreciated among the practitioner communities. Practiced appropriately, applied research would give recognition to the initiative and creativity of practitioners in their situated communication practice. It might also help practitioners become more reflective about their own communication practices. Qualitative research skills could be quite helpful in this regard--self questions that generate depth, vividness and nuance in the critical reflection upon experience--in the same way that depth interviewers attempt to develop the same kinds of qualities in the talk of their interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

We frequently hear from our professional compatriots that communication research is "impractical". Sometimes the practitioner says this because she finds academic scholarship to be jargon laden and inaccessible. I am not suggesting we abandon our formalized academic language, every discipline has its own code, but if communication is a practical discipline, we do need to translate, explicate and apply our theories in ways that ordinary practitioners can

understand. I believe applied research helps scholars polish their skills at translating and interpreting their research for nonacademic audiences. Doing applied scholarship protects the academic discipline from shutting itself off from its roots in communication practice. Working for clients focuses our minds on the task of communication with our professional publics.

Communication scholarship is also said to be "impractical" because it deals with general theory that fails to give due consideration to the contexts and variations of communication practice. Practitioners have learned how to solve communications problems in these contexts. They rightly believe that communication scholarship fails to give due recognition to the tacit problem-solving knowledge that they possess. For one thing, communication practice continually develops and evolves in response to new contingencies posed by technological developments and sociocultural change. From the practitioner point of view, theoretical development often takes so much time that it always describes the past rather than the creative cutting edge. The tension between the generalizing aspirations of theory and the situational embeddedness of practice is an essential condition of the practical discipline. This tension is not a contradiction to be resolved, so much as it is a conversation that should be engaged.

One of the best ways to engage this conversation is through applied research. Applied research requires that general theory be adapted to the context of practice. On the other side of the coin, applied research continually reminds the academic researcher of the degree to which communication practice is situational and contingent. The discipline of practical research might keep our theory a little more grounded and sensitive to context. This ongoing conversation should serve to improve theory, specifically the degree of fit between theory and practice. In the end, there is nothing more theoretical than a good application.

Applied research might also help us begin to develop grounded theories of communication practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to complement our more general social scientific frameworks. One fruitful avenue for investigation would be to explore how communication practitioners solve problems and manage uncertainty in their everyday practice. This approach would set up a genuine collaborative effort between the practitioner and the academic researcher. In the process of collaboration, practitioners might come to better appreciate the elegance and rigor of systematic research practices, and the academic researcher might arrive at a better appreciation of the artistic side of communication practice. Developing grounded theories of practice might help build mutual respect between practitioners and academicians. There is no need for us to decide between whether communication practice is an art or a science, it includes elements of both.

A third sense in which academic perspectives are criticized as impractical has to do with the normative prescriptions that follow from some of our academic theories such as the two way symmetrical model (Grunig, 1992). Practitioners complain that normative theories are often naïve concerning the realities of communication practice. At one level, this is a complaint that we should expect about normative theory. Normative theory makes a distinction between the facts of current communication practice and the potentials for better communication practice: the distinction between what is and what could be. Normative theory should challenge communication practitioners to improve their practice. Good normative theory will vex some practitioners by challenging them, on the other hand it should be hard to dismiss or discount. The regulative ideals placed in front of practitioners should not be so lofty as to discourage pursuit, nor so low so as to engender complacency. Normative theory should stretch practitioners and annoy them, but to do these things it should also be credible.

I would contend that there is a need for grounded theories of ethical practice. Applied scholarship in this area would collaborate with practitioners and investigate how practitioners manage and resolve ethical dilemmas in their practice. Focusing on the "best practices" of practitioners would serve to increase the credibility of normative theory while retaining its challenge. This research project would require genuine collaboration between the researcher and the practitioner. The grounded theories of ethical practice that might result from such endeavors might better navigate the vexation/credibility dialectic than current academic efforts at normative theory have.

In the end, I believe that programs of systematic applied research could begin to address each of the respects in which communication practitioners consider academic communication research to be "impractical." In particular, I believe that applied research might be oriented towards building grounded theories of communication practice. Such theoretical development could serve to increase the mutual respect, if not always agreement, between communication scholars and communication practitioners.

For Our Own Sake

The last reason for turning toward more applied research is that it holds the promise of invigorating our teaching and our research. One important thing about applied research is that it usually takes place on someone else's turf. This means that it has greater potential to vex and surprise us than the more focused and orderly routines behind basic research. My turn toward applied research introduced me to new paradoxes and problems and has reconfigured my research program. In this vein, I will give you a bit of my own testimony.

Part of my turn toward applied communication research derived from my desire to focus my attention on things that really matter: things of substantive concern to my family, my

community and my profession. I felt a need to move beyond neat boundaries of my existing research. I wanted some new and important puzzles to work with

Between college and graduate school, I spent two years as a community service volunteer in Eastern Kentucky. I don't know exactly how my two years of volunteer work benefited that community, but I do know that those years were two very important years in my education. My two years in the mountains in Perry County, Kentucky provided me with important experiences to organize and understand when I went to graduate school. I remember being impressed at how difficult cross-cultural communication can be; how much we take fluid communication for granted; and how committed we tend to be toward a particular version of the communication code. Once I was in graduate school, I often turned toward reflecting on my observations about communication and communication processes while I was in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. It is not too much to say that my experiences from those two years helped to organize and give clarity to my graduate education.

I then spent the next dozen or so years obtaining my graduate degree, starting my academic career and receiving tenure. It was when my own children returned to school, that I began to consider the problems of public education. Here was something important that affected my own children: something that I wanted to be involved with. The state of Kentucky had launched a bold experiment in educational reform in the early 1990s. One of the reforms was to institute Site Based Decision-Making Councils, made up of parent representatives, teachers, and the school principal. My children were attending an inner-city magnet school in Louisville. I decided to participate in some of the committees that the school council set up. Several years later I decided to run for parent representative position. Once I was elected as a parent representative, I decided that it was time to really start spending some time at the school. I

wanted to understand the unique challenges that teachers and administrators faced in dealing with students from very diverse backgrounds (i.e., linguistic, socioeconomic and racial diversity).

Without going into the details, I decided to spend a great deal of time at the school. Two days a week, I served as a reading tutor. I also worked with the Title I reading teacher to try track and assess the school's success in teaching reading to children in its primary program (grades 1-3). I immediately found that there was a very considerable controversy between two contending schools of reading pedagogy, whole language and phonics. I started with a purely pragmatic aim: determine which reading instruction methods were most efficacious in helping children from disadvantaged background to learn to read. In my naïve practical mode, I wanted to see what the research said about the efficacy of these two competing methods. As I read the opposing materials, my academic curiosity was piqued. Why should a simple technical question over reading teaching methods be transformed into an emotionally charged issue on radio talk shows? I quickly realized that the question of reading instruction methods had been transformed as an iconic issue in a cultural conflict between two paradigms of education: a traditional hierarchical model, and an egalitarian model. Each method was preferred or detested by practitioners because it represented claims about the correct form of learning, and the correct type of teaching relationship between teacher and student.

On a whim, I decided to investigate whether there were similar debates in other areas of the curriculum. Indeed, it took me only 1 hour of reading in the area of math instruction to discover a parallel controversy in mathematics education. Again there was a hierarchical model of what math pedagogy should consist of arrayed against an egalitarian version of the same. The discovery of these massive redundancies in educational argument led me to begin looking for

cultural conflicts everywhere. I returned to the library and contemplated how cultural arguments figure in the work of public relations. I thus was launched on a research trajectory that I anticipate will keep me occupied for many years to come.

I believe that doing some applied research ultimately brings us face to face with interesting theoretical questions. If it is true that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, it is also true that there is nothing so theoretical as a good application. My experience leaves with the conclusion that the tension between basic and applied research should not be construed as a zero-sum game. If my experience is typical, then the interplay between applied research and basic research can be one that is mutually reinforcing and invigorating. In the end, I think that we need to embrace applied community research in order to maintain a balance in our scholarly lives. A dose of the scholarship of application is needed to keep us on our toes, keep us open to new experiences, and to occasionally surprise us out of our intellectual complacency and self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

This paper has been a provisional first attempt to promote applied communication research as an important public relations tool for communications departments.
I argue that doing good applied research in our communities provides us with excellent opportunities to reach our most important publics. I believe that by doing genuine community based applied scholarship we have an opportunity to advance both the understanding and appreciation of what communication professors do.

The paper is very limited in its scope, and seemingly naïve in some of its recommendations. It does not approach the very large problem of how we are to change the reigning epistemologies of universities that privilege the scholarship of discovery and

marginalize the scholarships of application, teaching, and integration (Schon, 1995). Assistant professors put their careers in peril if they do not give their full attention to the scholarship of discovery. However, I am trying to paint a picture of how those of us with relative freedom, those of us who have tenure, might begin to address the serious public relations problems that we have with our important audiences. I believe that our communities, our students, and the communication professions we serve will be enriched if we can come down out of our ivory towers and engage the protracted issues of communication practice that flourish around us.

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